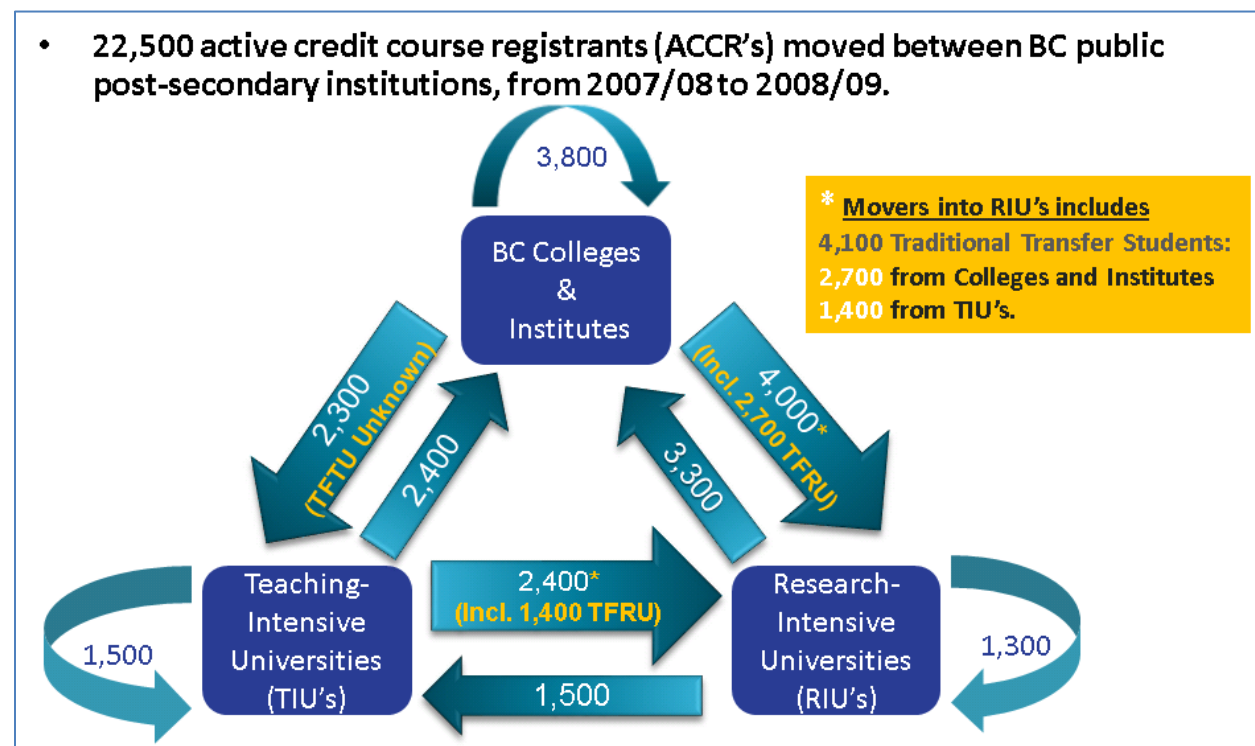


**A RATIONALE FOR
EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF STUDENT MOBILITY**
February 15, 2011

Abstract

The Student Transitions Project (STP) has demonstrated that students are moving in multiple directions between institutions, not just in the traditional college to research university direction (see Figure 1). Every institution plays a role as both a sending and receiving institution to varying degrees. However, little is known about the transfer behaviour of the bulk of these student movers because research universities are the only institutions that are currently able to identify traditional transfer students. If transfer information, including basis of admission and volume of credits transferred, was available on these students from every institution, then students, institutions, and the BC system would all benefit. A better understanding of these seemingly complex transfer patterns would facilitate better planning and policy decisions at all levels and would help to maintain and improve BC's excellent student transfer/mobility system.

Figure 1: 22,500 active credit course registrants moved between BC public post-secondary institutions from 2007/08 to 2008/09.



Source: The Student Transitions Project: 2011

Student Mobility Research in a Changing Post-Secondary Landscape

The BC Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) has historically conducted research on the traditional transfer student population defined as those students moving from “sending” institutions (colleges, teaching-intensive universities, and institutes) to “receiving” institutions (research universities). Working with the STP, BCCAT is reconceptualising transfer student research, taking into account the changing nature of the post-secondary system in which most institutions are degree granting and students are moving in multiple directions and across many program areas. Indeed the traditional transfer student population represents less than 20 percent of the students that switch post-secondary institutions in a given year. (See Figure 1.)

BCCAT and the STP are working on a number of fronts to expand our understanding of all student movers. A major difficulty with expanding research on students who may transfer credits from one institution to another is that institutions other than research universities do not provide any information on transfer students. The Central Data Warehouse (CDW) has data fields for transfer data, but they are generally not populated because of issues associated with definitions, the availability of the data, and CDW data field structure. As well, research universities have transfer as a basis of admission but do not report to the STP on volume of credits earned.

Why would we want to know more about students who move among post-secondary institutions?

BCCAT met with the BC Registrars’ Association (BCRA) in October 2010 to explore options for adding some level of transfer data to the CDW at the course and/or program level. Registrars asked a number of insightful questions, including what the underlying reasons were for wanting to learn more about all students who switch institutions from year to year. Below is an explanation of those reasons, written from three perspectives: the institution, the system as a whole, and students. The section below assumes that many of these questions would be answered through analysis of existing information available in the CDW and the STP in combination with new transfer information for CDW-reporting institutions and research universities. Some answers would be inferred from the data.

An Institutional Perspective

Institutions could benefit from understanding these transfer patterns in terms of retention, recruitment, and program planning.

Retention

- How many credits do students accumulate before leaving my institution to go to another institution?
- What program did they leave and what program did they enrol in at their destination institution?
- Did they receive transfer credit for courses taken at my institution?
- What might I do to keep students longer at my institution?

Recruitment

- How many students enrol in my institution who attended a previous institution? Which institution?
- What programs were they enrolled in previously and what are they enrolled in at my institution?
- How many credits did my institution award these incoming students?
- What can I do to recruit more transfer students to more programs?

Program Planning

- Based on mobility and transfer patterns, what programs might we expand or introduce to attract more transfer students?
- What can we change in our course or program offerings to keep students who may otherwise transfer to another institution?
- How can we develop our programs in cooperation with other institutions to ensure transferability where warranted for the benefit of students?

A System Perspective

When explaining why it is important to understand the mobility and transfer patterns of all student movers, one must also consider the benefits from a system perspective. The following questions could be answered with more complete data on students transferring credit in multiple directions.

- Are students transferring credit in sufficient numbers to warrant negotiation of formal articulation agreements versus assessing transfer credit on a case-by-case basis?
- Based on transfer numbers, and in light of the complexity and labour intensive nature of course-to-course transfer, is there a solid business case for expanding the transfer system to include more institutions as both sending and receiving institutions?
- Are students getting appropriate credit for previous learning, thus leading to a more efficient post-secondary system in terms of resources expended by government and students on credential completion?
- What are the transfer patterns among programs and credentials that can tell us whether or not granting transfer credit is warranted?
- Are post-secondary institutions working collaboratively as a system to facilitate the movement of large number of students while maximizing transfer of credit?
- What is the impact of teaching-intensive universities on traditional transfer patterns?
- What information can be provided to students to assist them with planning their transfer from one institution to another?

Students' Perspective

There are many potential advantages for students from being able to both move among institutions and receive transfer credit for previous relevant coursework or programs. These are listed below as statements rather than as questions.

- Students do not have to waste their time and money taking courses needlessly if credit is granted for appropriate previous coursework or programs.
- Students can plan their education paths better if they are aware in advance of the courses and programs that they will receive credit for when they transfer from one institution to another.
- Students can make more informed choices if they are aware in advance of all the post-secondary pathways open to them and the transfer implications of choosing these pathways.
- Future students benefit from policy oriented research that improves the effectiveness of transfer pathways.